

assume vivid astro focus at MCASB

Duo Stages 'Retrospective' at Museum of Contemporary Art



Courtesy Photo

EXPLOSIONS IN SPACE: In its MCA exhibit, the art collective assume vivid astro focus uses custom wallpaper, video projection, and dozens of brightly colored area rugs to transform the space into a dizzying, challenging, frequently satisfying postmodern rec room.

Story by Charles Donelan

Tuesday, September 27, 2016

The digital revolution has accustomed us to a near-perpetual state of image immersion. Swipe this way, tap that, snap, and the whole world snaps you right back. Assume vivid astro focus (avaf), the art-making collaborative founded by Eli Sudbrack and Christophe Hamaide-Pierson, embraces this flood of stimulation even as it comments on and criticizes certain aspects of it. In *avalanches volcanoes asteroids floods*, their current show at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Santa Barbara, the group uses custom wallpaper, video projection, and dozens of brightly colored area rugs bearing images from their previous output to transform the space into a dizzying, challenging, and frequently satisfying postmodern rec room.

It's impossible to ignore the first important difference in how this show is presented, for in order to enter the space, you must either remove your shoes or cover them with disposable white booties. The reason for this precaution quickly becomes obvious; in order to see this work, you have to walk on it. In an age when almost anything can potentially end up hanging on a gallery wall, this simple act of displacement is a canny move. There's something inherently comforting about a nice rug — it says, "Relax. I'm here to make you comfortable." But as you look more closely, the images beneath your feet begin to complicate that cozy sense of "we're all in socks here."

In terms of design, the fundamentals are both strong and familiar. Take geometric abstraction, add pop iconography, and crank up the intensity of the colors and the contrasts. If that were the whole story, avaf designs could be available at Target. But I don't think you'll be seeing "Nazi Dick Mandala (Jamaica)," a flag created for Glasgow International, on any beach towels soon. It's a symmetrical piece, horizontally oriented, with identical left and right mouths in black, flashing, big red tongues, just like in the Rolling Stones' famous logo. Those white swastikas toward which each tongue so suggestively extends? Upon closer examination, they're penises, and if you get even closer,

well — they're leaking some fluid. Yellow and green stripes complete both the flag design and the Jamaica reference, leaving the viewer to puzzle out the significance of this wildly provocative juxtaposition.

Fortunately, the team is just as explicit about what they are doing as they are with their imagery, and the catalog essay by MCA's chief curator and executive director, Miki Garcia, offers the following helpful explanation for those coming to the work for the first time. The images on the rugs “break down into two categories” — “abstraction and color” and “subjects related to LGBTQ politics.” It's through this interpretive lens — in which the show represents “not simply a look back at past work but a reaction to the devastating homophobic killings in Orlando,” which happened right as the artists arrived in Santa Barbara to install the exhibit — that *avalanches volcanoes asteroids floods* makes the most sense.

That said, making sense is not a primary concern here. The sheer quantity of allusion — Artforum and voguing, Ann Magnuson and a stripper, Sonia Delaunay and Henri Matisse — feels designed to be savored uncritically rather than deconstructed for some political message. Is that Leigh Bowery? Let's hope so. Regardless, this exciting and dynamic experience demands repeated viewings from those who can appreciate the wit and panache with which it has been constructed. Just remember to wear nice socks.